

# On Bharatanatyam

T. BALASARASWATI

**B**haratanatyam is an art which consecrates the body which is considered to be in itself of no value. The *yogi* by controlling his breath and by modifying his body acquires the halo of sanctity. Even so, the dancer, who dissolves her identity in rhythm and music, makes her body an instrument, at least for the duration of the dance, for the experience and expression of the spirit.

I believe that the traditional order of the Bharatanatyam recital viz., *alarippu*, *jatiswaram*, *sabdam*, *varnam*, *padams*, *tillana* and the *sloka* is the correct sequence in the practice of this art, which is an artistic *yoga*, for revealing the spiritual through the corporeal.

The greatness of this traditional concert-pattern will be apparent even from a purely aesthetic point of view. In the beginning, *alarippu*, which is based on rhythm alone, brings out the special charm of pure dance. The movements of *alarippu* relax the dancer's body and thereby her mind, loosen and coordinate her limbs and prepare her for the dance. Rhythm has a rare capacity to concentrate. *Alarippu* is most valuable in freeing the dancer from distraction and making her single-minded.

The joy of pure rhythm in *alarippu* is followed by *jatiswaram* where there is the added joy of melody. Melody, without word or syllable, has a special power to unite us with our being. In *jatiswaram*, melody and movement come together. Then comes the *sabdam*. It is here that compositions, with words and meanings, which enable the expression of the myriad moods of Bharatanatyam are introduced.

The Bharatanatyam recital is structured like a Great Temple: we enter through the *gopuram* (outer hall) of *alarippu*, cross the *ardhamandapam* (half-way hall) of *jatiswaram*, then the *mandapa* (great hall) of *sabdam*, and enter the holy precinct of the deity in the *varnam*. This is the place, the space, which gives the dancer expansive scope to revel in the rhythm, moods and music of the dance. The *varnam* is the continuum which gives ever-expanding room to the dancer to delight in her self-fulfilment, by providing the fullest scope to her own creativity as well as to the tradition of the art.

The *padams* now follow. In dancing to the *padams*, one experiences the containment, cool and quiet, of entering the sanctum from its external precinct. The expanse and brilliance of the outer corridors

*Photo: Courtesy M. Krishnan*



disappear in the dark inner sanctum; and the rhythmic virtuositities of the *varnam* yield to the soul-stirring music and *abhinaya* of the *padam*. Dancing to the *padam* is akin to the juncture when the cascading lights of worship are withdrawn and the drum beats die down to the simple and solemn chanting of sacred verses in the closeness of God. Then, the *tillana* breaks into movement like the final burning of camphor accompanied by a measure of din and bustle. In conclusion, the devotee takes to his heart the god he has so far glorified outside; and the dancer completes the traditional order by dancing to a simple devotional verse.

At first, mere metre; then, melody and metre; continuing with music, meaning and metre; its expansion in the centrepiece of the *varnam*; thereafter, music and meaning without metre; in variation of this, melody and metre; in contrast to the pure rhythmical beginning, a non-metrical song at the end. We see a most wonderful completeness and symmetry in this art. Surely the traditional votaries of our music and dance would not wish us to take any liberties with this sequence.

The aesthetics and the artistry of Bharatanatyam alike make us realise that *sringara* has pride of place here. In a sense, Bharatanatyam is a combination of the *yoga* and *mantra sastra*s. The *mudras* of the *mantra sastra* are the same as the hand gestures of Bharatanatyam. When dancing to the beat of the rhythm, as in a *yoga* exercise, the dancer's body is rid of its human weaknesses and is purified into a conduit of the spiritual and the beautiful. However, the experience of the art can be total only if a variety of moods and feelings are portrayed; and, variety is the soul of art. But these feelings should be universalised into aspects of divinity and not remain the limited experience of an insignificant human being. The mood of a song may tend to get portrayed as the subjective feeling of one individual; but true art lies in universalising this experience. To train the dancer in this art, melody and metre join together in *jatiswaram*, the dancer takes leave of her subjective consciousness in the *alarippu* and identifies herself with the universal consciousness in the *jatiswaram*. Hereafter, she is ready to explore and express the infinitely varied nuances of the entire gamut of emotions and feelings not in terms of her subjective self but in terms which bring out their universal essence.

*Sringara* stands supreme in this range of emotions. No other emotion is capable of better reflecting the mystic union of the human with the divine. I say this with deep personal experience of dancing to many great devotional songs which have had no element of *sringara* in them. Devotional songs are, of course, necessary. However, *sringara* is the cardinal emotion which gives the fullest scope for artistic improvisation, branching off continually, as it does, into the portrayal of innumerable moods full of newness and nuance.

If we approach Bharatanatyam with humility, learn it with dedication, and practise it with devotion to God, *sringara*, which brings

out the great beauties of this dance, can be portrayed with all the purity of the spirit. The flesh, which is considered to be an enemy of the spirit, having been made a vehicle of the divine in the discipline of the dance, *sringara*, which is considered to be the greatest obstacle to spiritual realisation, has itself, we shall realise, become an instrument for uniting the dancer with Divinity.

(Since the dancer has universalised her experience, all that she goes through is also felt and experienced by the spectator.)

Refined in the crucible of *alarippu* and *jatiswaram*, the dancer portrays the emotions of the musical text in the *sabdam* in their pristine purity. In the *sabdam*, emotions are withheld at the beginning; thereafter, when the dancer has clarified herself, they are released in a measured and disciplined manner. It is after mastering this discipline that she dances the *varnam* which is a living river that holds together movement and interpretation.

The composer of a *sabdam* or a *varnam* might have dedicated it to a prince or a nobleman. But as far as the dancer is concerned, the hero can only be the King of kings, the Lord of the wide world. It is impossible for her to dedicate her art, which has sanctified her body and has made her heart sacred, to a mere mortal. She can experience and communicate the sacred in what appears to be secular. After all, our composers have been steeped in the tradition of *bhakti*. While singing the praise of secular heroes, they begin to dwell on his devotion to Brihadishwara of Tanjavur or to Tyagesa of Tiruvarur or to Padmanabha of Tiruvanandapuram. The dancer taking the cue, enters the realm of *bhakti*, enjoys the play and pranks of the deity concerned and displays them in her *abhinaya*. The divine, so far mixed with the secular, now becomes explicit in the dance and impresses itself deep in the heart. Various rhythmic movements are inter-twined with her *abhinaya*; this saves her from degenerating into the human, and keeps her fresh and pure in the *yoga* of the dance.

It is after passing through this ordeal of fire that the dancer fully qualifies herself to do *abhinaya* for the *padams*. If she has dedicated herself to the art, there will be no carnal distortions in her interpretations of the *padam*. Steeped in art and beauty, which are pure spiritual states, she expresses the joy which is at the basis of different moods and emotions. Such a dancer will feel no need to "purify" any item in the traditional order of Bharatanatyam.

Indeed, the effort to purify Bharatanatyam through the introduction of novel ideas is like putting a gloss on burnished gold or painting the lotus.

The inadequacies that are felt in this art arise from the inadequacies of the dancer herself. If Bharatanatyam is studied with devotion, dedication, patience and thoroughness, its completeness in its traditional form will be crystal clear. The traditional sequence and structure of the recital secures and safeguards this completeness. There

is, therefore, no need to purify perfection by amending, adding or subtracting any of the elements in the traditional order of the recital.

The traditional recital is a rich combination of diverse aesthetic and psychological elements which produces complete enjoyment. To alter this arrangement because it is considered "boring" is to destroy the integrity of aesthetic enjoyment.

Let those who create novel dance forms present them as separate performances; they need not make a hash of the Bharatanatyam recital by interpolations of novelties. Of Madhavi's dancing master, the *Silappadikaram* says that "he knew when only one hand had to be used (*pindi*) and when both the hands had to be used (*pinaiyal*). He also knew when the hands had to be used for exhibiting action (*tolirkai*) and for graceful effect (*elirkai*). Knowing as he did the conventions of dancing, he did not mix up the single-handed demonstration (*kutai*) with the double-handed (*varam*) and vice versa, as also pure gesture with gesticulatory movement and vice versa. In the movements of the feet also he did not mix up the *kuravai* with the *vari*. He was such an expert".

The dancer can integrate herself with her discipline if she goes through the traditional sequence in one continuous flow without too much of an interval between one item and another; and the completeness of the recital in its entirety will assert itself. My personal opinion is that this concerted effect of the experience of dancing, which needs mental concentration, is spoilt by frequent changes of costume.

*Silappadikaram* and *Manimekalai* list dance, music and the personal beauty of the dancer in that order. Yet unfortunately the last and least of them has come to the forefront at the present time. When so much importance is attached to the looks of the dancer, it is but natural that dancing is considered carnal and *sringara* vulgar. The truth is exactly the opposite; it is her dance and music alone that make a dancer beautiful.

Kalidasa describes Malavika standing tired and perspiring after her dance as the best of all her *abhinaya*. This is not just poetic conceit. Even when the collyrium gets smudged and the make-up is disturbed in the course of the dance, that itself is a tribute to the dancer's dedication.

When the continuity of the dance is interrupted by costume changes, announcements and explanations, the congealing of inner feeling becomes impossible and concentration is shattered.

The greatest blessing of Bharatanatyam is its ability to control the mind. Most of us are incapable of single-minded contemplation even when actions are abandoned. On the other hand, in Bharatanatyam actions are not avoided; there is much to do but it is the harmony of various actions that results in the concentration we seek. The burden of action is forgotten in the pleasant charm of the art. The feet keeping to time, hands expressing gesture, the eye following the hand with

expression, the ear listening to the dance master's music, and the dancer's own singing — by harmonising these five elements the mind achieves concentration and attains clarity in the very richness of participation. The inner feeling of the dancer is the sixth sense which harnesses these five mental and mechanical elements to create the experience and enjoyment of beauty. It is the spark which gives the dancer her sense of spiritual freedom in the midst of the constraints and discipline of the dance. The *Yogi* achieves serenity through concentration that comes from discipline. The dancer brings together her feet, hands, eyes, ears and singing into a fusion which transforms the serenity of the *yogi* into a torrent of beauty. The spectator, who is absorbed in intently watching this, has his mind freed of distractions and feels a great sense of clarity. In their shared involvement, the dancer and the spectator are both released from the weight of worldly life, and experience the divine joy of the art with a sense of total freedom.

To experience this rare rapture, a dancer has only to submit herself willingly to discipline. It will be difficult in the beginning to conform to the demands and discipline of rhythm and melody and to the norms and codes of the tradition. But if she humbly submits to the greatness of this art, soon enough she will find joy in that discipline; and she will realise that discipline makes her free in the joyful realm of the art.

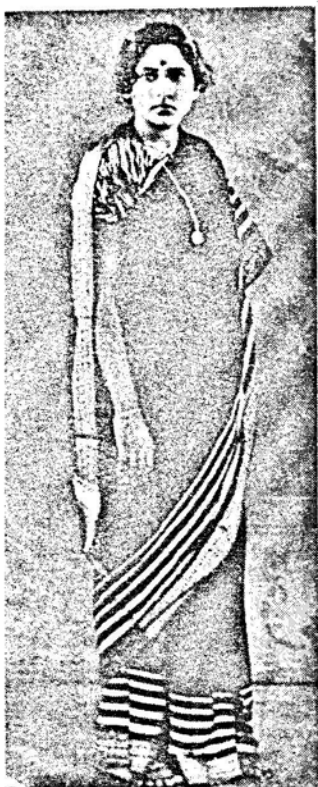
*The greatest authorities on the dance have definitively recognised that it is the orthodoxy of traditional discipline which gives the fullest freedom to the individual creativity of the dancer.*

Young dancers who go in for novelties will find that their razzle-dazzle does not last long. On the other hand, if they hold firm to the tradition, which like the Great Banyan strikes deep roots and spreads wide branches, they will gain for themselves and those who watch them the dignity and joy of Bharatanatyam. I come out with these submissions only because of my anxiety that they should realise this. The young will recognise the greatness of this art if they study it with intense participation, calmly and without haste.

One has to begin early and learn it for many years to reach a devout understanding of the immanent greatness of this art. Then comes the recognition of one's great good fortune in being chosen to practise this art; this recognition leads the dancer to surrender herself to her art. Such surrender makes her aware of the divinity and wholeness of Bharatanatyam. And the art will continue to flourish without the aid of new techniques which aim at "purifying" it or changes in dress, ornament, make-up and the interpolation of new items which seek to make it more "complete". This is my prayer. □□

*(T. Balasaraswati's presidential address at the 33rd Annual Conference of the Tamil Isai Sangam, Madras, on 21 December 1975. Translated from the Tamil by S. Guhan.)*





*Anti-clockwise: Balasaraswati, 1936;  
Jayammal and Balasaraswati (first and  
second from left) at a recording (Photo:  
S.N.A. Archives); Balasaraswati (third  
from left) with Kuravanji group, 1952  
(Photo: Tamil Isai Sangam, Madras).*

